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Kingsley, Darwin Pearl

Shall we pay the innkeeper's bill?

[S.l.]

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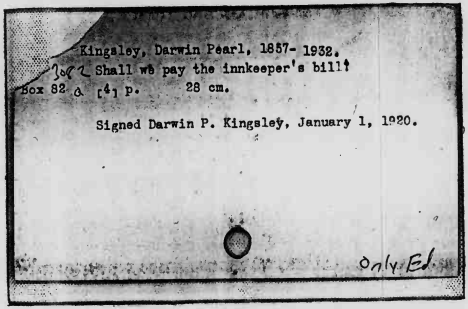
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SHALL WE PAY THE INNKEEPER'S BILL?

Shall We Pay the Innkeeper's Bill?

WE entered the year 1919 happy almost to point of ecstasy. The fighting was over; we held the friendship, the profound respect, in some instances the warm admiration, of all nations.

Ours was the moral leadership of the world.

We enter the year 1920, generally prosperous but faced with many domestic problems and still struggling with the unsettled international problem.

Let us face the facts.

We have in a year substantially lost our position of leadership in international morals.

I know of nothing that so aptly illustrates what we did in the European war and why we did it, as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You recall that Jesus recited this parable for the benefit of a lawyer who had sneeringly asked him "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus then turned on the lawyer having recited the story, and said "Which was neighbor to him that fell amongst thieves? The priest, the Levite, or the Good Samaritan?" and even the lawyer answered without hesitation, "He that showed mercy on him".

The finest thing in that parable is not that the Good Samaritan went to the assistance of the man who had been stripped of his raiment and left bleeding on the roadside, nor that he went after the priest and the Levite had passed by on the other side. The finest part is that which describes how the Samaritan after he had bound up the man's wounds, put him on his own beast, took him to an Inn, and promised to pay the Innkeeper's bills. In everyday language he didn't leave the task half done. He carried through. He might well have thought that his duty had been fully met in binding up the man's wounds, pouring in wine and oil, and then leaving him by the roadside. Up to this point helping the victim of the thieves had cost him something, but not very much. The real sacrifice came in surrendering his own beast to the use of the man, taking time to conduct him to an Inn, and particularly in undertaking to pay the Innkeeper's bill.

In 1917 we undertook the part of the Good Samaritan. I think I may say, because I believe that the almost unanimous opinion of Europe will assent, that no nation in history ever threw itself more generously, more wholeheartedly, more unselfishly into any enterprise. We didn't stop to make terms; we didn't ask for anything. In fact we announced in advance that we didn't want anything. Whatever the war cost us it would cost, but we undertook the expense because we couldn't otherwise keep our self-respect, and we didn't expect when the war was over to claim land, or indemnity, or advantage of any kind. Our impulses were quite as fine as those which moved the Good Samaritan. In so far as I know history, nothing morally equal to it was ever done by any other nation in the history of the world.

Now we are coming to the second part of the parable. We are facing the completion of our duty and we hesitate. We balk at the proposal that we are to take the wounded man to the Inn, and we absolutely refuse to undertake to pay the bills. That is we seem to do that. That is a superficial view. Historically the American people always come to right decision but they sometimes take a good deal of time, especially when no great leader appears to show them the way. We are so cocksure of ourselves that we sometimes forget that the problem of self-government when a nation covers a continent and includes over a hundred million people, is an immense problem.

The moving force in the last analysis is public opinion. Public opinion isn't often formed quickly and when it is, it's likely to be wrong. Public opinion sometimes comes to a sound conclusion only after reaching a lot of intermediate conclusions that are far from sound. This is true particularly when great leaders are absent. Let me illustrate concretely what I mean by that.

Everybody knows the story of George Washington. Everybody knows the infinite patience and courage and patriotism of that man. Everybody knows that but for the power of his leadership there would have been no Yorktown and no American independence. Everybody knows that if the matter had been left to a popular vote almost any time during the progress of the war, the war would have been abandoned. That is leadership in a crisis.

Not everybody understands what Alexander Hamilton did at the second great crisis in the development of the country. Students of history know it but they're not so numerous, and I think it safe to say that only a minority of our people to-day realize that Hamilton's logic and eloquence drove the Constitution through the Convention in the State of New York, against a majority of public opinion, and thereby substantially created the Federal Union. That again was leadership.

Again few people outside of lawyers understand what John Marshall did as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in the long period of his leadership. Those were turbulent days. The majority of public opinion had by no means accepted the fact notwithstanding the provisions of the Constitution that the Federal Government in its sphere was supreme. The doctrine of State Rights dear to all the States but especially dear to Virginia, fought John Marshall all through the great series of opinions that he rendered. He narrowly escaped impeachment for decisions which are now almost as fundamental in our national life as the Constitution itself. The clearness of vision, courage, and the invincible logic of John Marshall attained great ends against an overwhelming adverse majority of the people. The majority finally thought right, but it took time and great leadership to achieve that.

Everybody knows what leadership meant when it took form in the person of Abraham Lincoln. Everybody knows what he suffered, with godlike patience. Everybody knows how he clung to the one idea of saving the Union, although territorially half the nation was in revolt against the idea, and in the count of popular votes substantially one-half of the North was also against him. The majority of people everywhere now agrees with Lincoln and he has become a demigod for acts which that same majority as it stood in 1861 fiercely condemned. That again was great leadership.

Sometimes events crystallize public opinion quickly. Sometimes the great mind of the masses reaches a sound conclusion over-night.

That happened when the Hun ordered us off the seven seas in the early months of 1917.

Prior to April of that year the people had not come to any clear conclusion. Only a few months before a great political party had elected a President on a peace cry. But after the Hun offered the crowning affront having already committed every conceivable and inconceivable crime, the judgment of our people was swift and in its stroke terrible to the last degree. We went unreservedly, almost quixotically to the relief of Europe. The unselfishness of that act will make our children's children proud of their descent.

Now we have fallen on different days. The right which is so clear in the stress of war, is not so clear in quiet days. The enthusiasm which ushered in the new Republic with its great Charter lasted while George Washington lived, although few men were ever maligned as he was during his later days. Then came practical politics, confusion, selfishness. Public opinion was not even then up to the demands of the Federal Constitution. Hamilton and Madison had forced its adoption but opinion had not yet caught up with them. The old fears returned and the arguments which so nearly defeated the Constitution very nearly destroyed it later on.

Our entry into the late war was as splendid, as unprecedented, as completely at variance with all precedents as was our fathers' acts when they created the United States of America. We hated the job. They did not like theirs. We didn't want to mix in European affairs. Our fathers didn't believe the Thirteen States had much in common. We knew, when we took up Germany's challenge, that there would be far-reaching consequences. But we finally reached the point where we put every consideration aside to do the one thing necessary. Now we drift in the slack water of inaction. Now we face days when politicians are busy. When selfishness is quick—days like those in which John Marshall delivered his opinion in Gibbons *vs.* Ogden, except that in these days we have no John Marshall to lead us.

It is natural, and no reflection on the people, that we should want to get out of the European muddle as quickly as possible. We all still have the provincial mind. We all naturally look at Europe as we might if it were on another planet. Even this war had not taught us as a people how small the world is. We do not comprehend that the world is so small that nothing of importance can happen anywhere in it that doesn't involve us in its consequences. We instinctively want to run away from the task we undertook in April, 1917. The task is nowhere near finished.

Shall we pay the Innkeeper's bill. Or shall we refuse to pay it leaving the victim of the thieves to be turned out into the highways of the world, not only physically starved but a prey to every conceivable form of social, economic, and political evil.

Shall we join with other free nations in a Covenant which seeks to substitute reason for force and argument for machine guns? Shall we have peace and thereby make it possible for the reconstruction of the world to begin?

The existing condition is intolerable. A consciousness of that is now taking possession of the masses of our citizens. Woe to the man or party that can be held responsible when that consciousness crystallizes into action.

This people want peace. They don't understand the details of the so-called dead Treaty. But no more do they believe, however much they may deplore the practical unwisdom of some of his methods, that President Wilson brought back from Paris a document planned or calculated to rob them of their liberties. Neither do they believe that the Senate has nominally destroyed the Treaty from sheer party pique. They understand enough of that instrument to know that it calls for some grave departure from our long-settled programme. They understand why the Senate debated and they approved a reasonable amount of debate. The people understand that the President wants us to finish our great task by an instrument called a League of Nations. The people believe that the Senate is honestly trying to preserve institutions that cost so much and mean so much.

The good faith of the President is not in question, and with very few exceptions the good faith of the Senators is not in question; but neither circumstance gives us relief and as a people we want action; we want peace and we believe that peace with no International Covenant at all would be a moral defect of profound significance, and the probable cause of further wars.

Wherefore we demand that these good men get together. Let them eliminate the awful formalities that attach to their several dignities and talk together as human beings.

We drove off the thieves. That cost us a good deal.

We spent hundreds of millions through the Food Administrator, the Red Cross, and kindred organizations. In other words, we took the victim to the Inn.

Let all statesmen of all parties know that we are not ready to quit. We are willing to pay the Innkeeper's Bill.

Woodrow Wilson

President

Jan. 1, 1920

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